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Forest Service
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REQUEST FOR COMMENTS
Little Slate Project

I am inviting your comments on proposed activities of the **Little Slate Project** within the upper Little Slate watershed, tributary to Slate Creek and the Lower Salmon River.

Project Area Location

Little Slate Creek is a watershed in the Lower Salmon River subbasin. The Little Slate project area encompasses approximately 36,000 acres, of National Forest System lands. The project will take place on the Salmon River Ranger District of the Nez Perce National Forest, Idaho County, Idaho. The project lies about 14 air miles northeast of Riggins Idaho and 25 air miles south of Grangeville Idaho (Map 1).

The project area includes most of Little Slate Creek watershed and the tributaries: Boulder Creek, Van Buren, Miller and Rubie Creeks, and the headwaters of the Little Slate Creek. It also includes very small portions of John Day Creek, Allison Creek and White Sand Creek. The project area is legally located in portions or all of: T26N, R2E, Sec. 25, 35, 36; T26N, R3E, Sec. 21-36; T26N, R4E, Sec. 6-8, 16-22, 27-33; and T25N, R2E, Sec., 1-2, 11-12; T25N. R3E Sec. 1-24, 26-33. Several activities including: watershed restoration, prescribed burning, and reconstruction Road #643; would occur in small areas adjacent to the Little Slate watershed; specifically in the area of Nut Basin Point, and Healy Creek near Florence.

Proposed Action

The Salmon River Ranger District proposes to implement watershed restoration projects and use timber harvest or slashing, and prescribed fire to achieved desired age class, species distribution and landscape pattern. Map 1 indicates the vicinity of the project and Maps 2 & 3 show the proposed action project details. Table 1 summarizes the proposed action. The work is to begin in the spring of 2009.

Completion of the project will move the area toward a Desired Future Condition as defined in the Nez Perce National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (USDA-FS 1987, II-1& 2). Accomplishment of activities associated with these projects will improve or maintain ecosystem health and integrity; improve watershed and aquatic conditions, while providing wood products and maintaining recreational opportunities.

The purpose of and need for this project was determined after comparing the Desired Future Condition and the existing condition of the Little Slate project area. The Forest Plan provides a definition of Desired Future Condition (DFC), as well as direction for the management of the Little Slate project area.

The area's existing condition was determined using site-specific field examinations and scientific findings from the Slate Creek Ecosystem Analysis at the Watershed Scale-EAWS (USDA-FS 2000). The Slate Creek EAWS identified areas of high priority for resource concerns in the Upper Little Slate Creek, Van Buren and Boulder Creek subwatersheds. Resource concerns included: restore/conserve aquatic conditions and processes; transportation planning; enhance wildlife security; restore Whitebark pine communities in upper elevations, restore vegetation disturbance dynamics. This project includes management activities that address several of the actions that were identified in that document.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this project is to improve watershed conditions, manage and restore forest vegetation and reduce hazardous fuels.

Forest-wide Management Direction in the Nez Perce National Forest Plan; page II-1& 2; A.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22 applies to this project area (USDA-FS, 1987). The management area direction is to manage for timber production and other multiple uses, improve quality of elk and deer winter range, manage for old growth dependent species; and to protect and enhance habitat for riparian dependent resources.

There are three objectives of this project:

- Improve aquatic conditions and habitats to support recovery of aquatic species by: reducing sediment delivery, restoring connectivity of aquatic habitats, restoring stream side shade, improving streambank stability and hydrologic function of hillslopes.

- Revise road and trail management to reduce resource impacts from roads, trails and OHV use.

- Use timber harvest or slashing, and prescribed fire to achieved desire age class, species distribution and landscape pattern by:
  - Regenerating aging lodgepole pine to recover economic value and provide early seral habitat.
  - Creating a more natural range of vegetation disturbance patterns by increasing the size of some past disturbance openings, while promoting some larger patches of mature forest.
  - Increasing the relative proportion of long-lived fire resistant tree species by restoring or regenerating to western larch or ponderosa pine, while maintaining existing large diameter trees.
  - Restoring whitebark pine threatened by blister rust, bark beetles and fire suppression.

Table 1. Little Slate - Proposed Action Activities

Planned Vegetation Treatment Activities			Proposed Actions
Acres of Whitebark Pine Restoration	Boulder Creek (1 unit)	Hand	379
	Nut Basin Ridge (3 units)		478
Acres of Vegetation Treatment by Prescription Type	Commercial Thin	Ground Cable/Skyline	965 325
	Shelterwood	Ground Cable/Skyline	572 77
	Clearcut	Ground Cable/Skyline	1948 217
	Total Acres		**4105**
Acres of activity fuels treatment	Broadcast burn around units (2 areas)		1329
	Underburn		572
	Broadcast burn		1948
	Excavator Pile		965
	Hand pile		0
	Whole Tree Yard		619
Miles temporary road construction			17.4
Miles of reconstruction			4.9
Miles road reconditioning & watershed road improvement			72 (portions)
Re-enter Existing Rock Source (acres)			< 1
Watershed Restoration, Road & Trail Treatments			**Proposed Actions**
Miles existing road decommissioning - Recontour			43
Miles existing road decommissioning – Abandon			3
Miles existing road decommissioning – Road to Trail Conversion			1
Miles of Trail 88 Re-route (new, re-locate, decommission)			1.6, 1.6, 2.1
Miles of Trail 133 Reconstruction			0.3
Miles of Trail 303 Re-route (new, re-locate, decommission)			0.4, 1.25, 0.3
Miles of Trail 303 Re-route (new, decommission)			0.9, 0.8
Acres of Soil Restoration			30
Miles of Riparian Restoration			2.5
Acres of Gully Stabilization (Along 441 road near Nut Basin Lake)			20-50
Sites of Channel Stabilization			5
Sites of Mine Rehabilitation (inactive placer)			10
Sites of Stream Crossing Improvement– Fish passage barriers, upgrade or replacement			6
Sites of Culvert/log bridge Removal			15
SOIL - Forest Plan Amendment			
Forest Plan – Number			1

Condition contributing to the Purpose and Need for Action

Little Slate Creek and it tributaries provide important habitat for listed fish species, Bull and Steelhead trout. Some streams currently do not fully support their beneficial uses as a result of past activities. Historic mining, logging, road building and grazing have changed floodplain function and instream habitat conditions (fine sediment, spawning/rearing habitat, water temperature). These changes have directly impacted aquatic habitat and other resources. In addition there is a need to improve aquatic habitat conditions to meet Forest Plan fish and water quality objectives.

The existing transportation system is extensive in the Little Slate project area. Roads and trails have affected wildlife security and degraded aquatic conditions. Important wildlife security areas are compromised by current motorized use and off-highway vehicle (OHV) use off designated routes. Transportation system management was identified as a priority for roads and trails in the Little Slate Creek area (Slate Creek EAWS, 2000). The transportation system provides valuable public and administrative access. Public input and this project level analysis are needed to make decisions regarding the revision of transportation management to reduce resource impacts.

Forest vegetation is in need of treatment, to achieve desired age class, species distribution and landscape pattern.

- Aging lodgepole pine has reached its pathological rotation in some areas and is highly susceptible to mountain pine beetle.
- The forest landscape has been fragmented by past timber harvest (clearcut) and the range of opening sizes are less than desired. Mature forests have also been fragmented and larger patches are scarce.
- Western larch, ponderosa pine and Douglas fir regeneration in the project area has decreased due to past harvest and succession. They are at higher risk of loss due to pathogens or fire because of high stand densities and ladder fuels.
- Whitebark pine has declined severely due to blister rust, mountain pine beetle and fire suppression.

Discussion of Vegetation Treatments

The exclusion of wildfire, a naturally occurring ecological process, from the area/landscape has resulted in a vegetative condition that did not historically exist in the area. This resulting condition, with its associated fuels buildup, poses an increased risk for catastrophic wildfire effects which would subsequently affect specific resources including water quality, wildlife populations and habitat, old growth, and Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive plant species populations and habitat.

Silvicultural prescriptions are needed to manage vegetation in the Little Slate project area. Treatment units are focused in spatial clusters rather than scattered and considered road management needs. Treatments are focused on lodgepole pine regeneration, western larch/ponderosa pine maintenance and restoration, and Whitebark pine restoration. This would create a more natural mosaic pattern and scale of vegetation disturbances in the Little Slate project area.

Actions planned to achieve disturbance patterns, species size and age class distribution include treatment of lodgepole pine, mixed conifer and Whitebark pine stands. A combination of prescribed fire, under burning, broadcast burning, excavator piling, hand piling and pile/burning (jackpot) would be used to treat activity fuels or connect areas treated.

Dispersed clearcut harvest and fire suppression in the past has contributed to forest conditions and landscape pattern that are unnatural. Past harvest units are typically deficient of snags and coarse woody debris. Early seral forest and old growth forest have both been reduced in extent and diversity of patch size. Movement corridors and diversity of wildlife cover are less available. Ladder fuels that can transition to crown fires are more abundant in some unharvested stands.

Decadent lodgepole pine that would have been naturally regenerated by wildfire still exists over large areas. Mixed conifer forest that would have been visited by mixed severity fire, with resulting maintenance or regeneration of Douglas-fir, larch, and ponderosa pine, is more uniformly multistoried and densely stocked than natural. Such stands are more subject to drought stress and pathogens. Whitebark pine at upper elevations is much reduced in extent and is being replaced by subalpine fir forest or open parkland.

Actions planned to move toward more natural disturbance types, scale and pattern in the landscape include the following harvest prescriptions: clearcut with reserve trees, shelterwood with some overstory retention, and commercial thinning from below to favor larger more fire-resistant trees. A combination of prescribed fire, under burning, broadcast burning, excavator piling, hand piling and pile/burning (jackpot) would be used to reduce fuels. Scale of harvest areas would vary more widely than in recent harvest history.

Actions to recover landscape pattern include clustering of harvest adjacent to existing harvested areas to create some larger early seral openings, while increasing retention of green leave trees, snags and down wood. This strategy would also focus some harvest along roads that would be

decommissioned, to treat areas now and to avoid the need for re-entry in the near future. Avoiding harvest in mature forest near old growth core areas would recover larger stand size of mature and old forest.

Actions to recover or maintain "at-risk" species in the landscape include: thinning/shelterwood harvest to maintain larch, ponderosa pine or Douglas-fir; slashing and burning to maintain or regenerate whitebark pine; and planting harvested areas to increase the abundance of these species on the landscape.

Proposed Vegetation Treatments.

The following activities are proposed to manage vegetation and reduce fuel hazards (Map 2).

- **Clearcut with Reserve Trees.** – This prescription has been proposed for those stands with few or no healthy, vigorous trees present in the overstory, and those stands dominated with lodgepole pine with little regeneration present. The term clearcut implies removal of up to 95% of the tree canopy in a stand (the amount of ground covered by the tree crown). Reserve trees within a clearcut area will be a combination of individual trees and snags, in clumps or patches. Western larch and ponderosa pine trees, greater that 21" diameter breast height, would be retained where they occur. Trees would be retained to mitigate impacts on visual, wildlife, and soil productivity resources. Regeneration would occur by artificial (plant western larch and ponderosa pine) or natural means following site preparation. Approximately **1948 acres** would be harvested with ground-based systems and **217 acres** would be cable yarded.

- **Shelterwood or Irregular Shelterwood.** For the purpose of this project, a shelterwood or irregular shelterwood cut is a treatment that removes up to 75% of the tree canopy in a stand. The retained tree canopy includes overstory and understory trees (dead or green). Up to 50% of the overstory tree canopy may be retained within a unit to provide shade and other resource benefits. Trees retained include medium to large diameter trees (14 inches Dbh, or larger), with a priority on western larch and ponderosa pine. For this proposal, a shelterwood cut is a single cut (entry) to reduce fuels (majority lodgepole pine), allow natural regeneration (some planting of seral species), and provide structural diversity with healthy larger trees. An irregular shelterwood cut would have a patchy or irregular distribution and density of residual trees and subsequent regeneration. Approximately **572 acres** would be harvested with ground-based systems and **77 acres** would be cable yarded.

- **Commercial Thinning Harvest.** – This prescription has been proposed for units which are predominantly mixed conifer. The thinning from below would mainly remove intermediate suppressed trees and retain a majority of the healthy dominant and co-dominant trees in the overstory. Roughly 30 to 60 percent of the merchantable trees would be removed to improve the quality of the remaining trees and improve species composition. The priority species for retention are seral species such as, ponderosa pine and western larch, but healthy larger Douglas-fir, Englemann spruce and grand fir are also viable leave trees. Trees displaying good form and crown conditions would be retained in a range of 40 to 100 trees per acre. Underburning would be implemented where feasible. Approximately **965 acres** would be harvested with ground-based systems and **325 acres** would be cable yarded.

- **Whitebark Pine Enhancement.** - This prescription has been proposed for stands where the whitebark pine component has experienced a noticeable decline as a result of successional replacement by shade tolerant species. The objective would be to release immature whitebark pine trees that are currently competing with other species and encourage natural regeneration around mature cone-producing whitebark pine trees. Competing vegetation, primarily subalpine fir less than 8 inches dbh, would be felled within a 10 to 15 foot radius of immature whitebark pine trees, and within a 30 to 50 foot radius of mature cone-producing whitebark pine trees. Felled trees would be lopped and scattered in most cases, or hand-piled and burned where concentrations occur. Approximately **857 acres** would be treated by hand.

- **Underburn (activity-generated fuels treatment, 572 acres).** A type of broadcast burn designed to reduce fuel accumulations beneath an overstory tree canopy (natural stand, shelterwood, seed tree), and prepare the area for future tree regeneration (natural seeding or planted). Activities would be implemented over a 1-5 year period.

- **Broadcast Burn (activity-generated fuels treatment, 1948 acres).** The purpose of a broadcast burn is to reduce fuel accumulations, or manipulate vegetation structure and density as part of a silvicultural treatment, or both. Broadcast burning may also be designed to prepare the area for future tree regeneration (natural seeding or planted). Activities would be implemented over a 1-5 year period.

- **Excavator pile (activity-generated fuels treatment, 965 acres).** Excavator piling is a type of mechanical piling of post harvest slash as a fuel treatment. This would normally be accomplished on slopes less than 35%. Piles would subsequently be burned to reduce fuels. Activities would be implemented over a 1-5 year period.

- **Whole Tree Yard (activity-generated fuel treatment, 619 acres).** Whole tree yarding brings the entire tree, including branches to the landing. A design measure would be developed to maintain soil productivity within the units. Material at the landing would be utilized for firewood or biomass as much as possible, with the remaining material piled and burned at the landing.

- **Prescribed/Broadcast Burn** (**1329 acres, 2 areas**). In the following designated areas, management ignited fire would be allowed to creep beyond activity unit boundaries with no intervention: the area south and east of the 221 road, west of the 643 road as far south as the Florence Townsite and Baboon Gulch; also, in the vicinity of Healy Creek and Little French Creek. Fire would be used to reduce activity fuels associated with vegetation treatments in the Little Slate project. Additionally, in an attempt to conserve resources and reduce environmental impacts, minimal firelines would be established around these treatment units. Fire would be allowed to creep outside of the treatment units, to reduce natural fuel buildup. Fire would be held by established road systems and/or riparian areas. No direct ignition would be initiated in riparian areas (Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas), but it is likely that fire would creep around providing a mosaic burn pattern that would mimic natural conditions. Activities would be implemented over a 1-5 year period.

    - Action would be taken if the fire escaped the analysis area.
    - Contingency actions would be addressed in the burn plan.

- Appropriate personnel will be located on-site, and the burns would be actively monitored using on-site and aerial resources on a routine, and, if necessary, daily basis until declared out.
- The primary method of ignition along with the prescription window would facilitate fire burning in a patchy pattern across the landscape.
- Low to mixed severity burns would result in a mosaic of live tree retention
- Outfitters potentially affected by management activities would be notified prior to burning.
- Noxious weeds would be monitored.

Proposed Road and Trail Treatments

The following activities are proposed to access areas to manage vegetation and reduce fuel hazards, reduce resource impacts from roads and trails, and provide recreation opportunities (refer to Map 2 & 3).

- **Temporary Road Construction.** Construct and decommission, following activities, approximately **17.4 miles** of temporary road to access vegetation treatment areas. Activities would be implemented over a 1-5 year period, following post harvest activity treatments (fuels treatments, site preparation and planting).

- **Road Reconstruction.** Reconstruct approximately **4.9 miles** of Road # 643 to accommodate hauling of forest products. This section of road is too narrow for log trucks and equipment. Portions of this road are also contributing sediment to Little Slate Creek. Reconstruction may involve re-alignment of portions of the existing road. Specific design will be determined during inventories scheduled for summer 2007. Activities would be implemented over a 1-2 year period.

- **Road Reconditioning & Watershed Road Improvement.** Complete reconditioning on a portion of **72 miles** of existing roads that access vegetation treatment areas. Activities include a combination of road ditch clean-out, blading and shaping the road surface to maintain a proper road template and drainage, or surfacing. This treatment is similar to what the average person considers as road maintenance. Sections of roads would be treated to reduce impacts to streams, soils and aquatic resources through activities such as: culvert replacement, ditch relief culverts, rolling dips, spot gravel placement, cut or fill slope treatments. Activities would be implemented over a 1-3 year period.

- **Road Decommissioning.** Decommission **47 miles** of existing road that are not needed for access to the area for public recreation or administrative use, using techniques ranging from abandonment (3 miles), recontouring (43 miles) or road to trail conversion (1 mile). Roads have been surveyed and represent an interdisciplinary, integrated recommendation for decommissioning. The selection of treatment type is based on the condition of the road, proximity to resource values such as streams, cost, and other factors. The objectives of road decommissioning are to reduce resource impacts (sediment delivery, ground water interception, under-sized culverts) and reduce maintenance costs by removing roads that are not needed for access. The treatments includes: full re-contouring to abandonment (road to be removed from the road system without disturbance of established vegetation and have adequate drainage at stream crossings and are considered stable). Activities would be

implemented over a 1-10 year period.

- **Dispersed Recreation Sites.** Twenty-four dispersed campsites are known within the project area. The locations of known dispersed campsites are displayed on Maps 2 & 3. Several of these sites are located on roads that will be decommissioned. Short sections of road near their junction with a system road would be retained.

  Site hardening (gravel surface) may be included to minimize impacts to aquatic resources at any dispersed recreation site retained. Select dispersed sites would require improvements or restoration beyond site hardening to reduce impacts to soils, vegetation and aquatic resources. This additional work may include the installation of barrier rock to control vehicle traffic, re-vegetation or naturalization. Additional sites may be found during inventories scheduled for summer 2007. Activities would be implemented over a 1- 3 year period.

- **Trail/Trailhead Improvements.** Construct new sections (re-locate) and decommission un-needed sections of the following trails to reduce resource impacts and maintain recreation opportunities (Map 3). The trail tread and trailheads would also be improved to meet agency standards through maintenance activities. Install signs to inform public of access restrictions on roads/trails and to assist law enforcement. Provide safe routes for public travel. Treat stream crossings to reduce impacts to water quality and fish habitat. Activities would be implemented over a 1-3 year period.

  - **Trail #88.** Construct 1.6 miles of new trail to make trail connections between system and temporary roads. Relocated 1.6 miles of the trail on to portions of temporary road or existing closed roads (road to trail conversion). Decommission 2.1 miles of trail along a tributary to Miller Creek.

  - **Trail #133.** Reconstruct 0.3 mile of trail from Road 441 to Nut Basin Lake. Improve the roadside trailhead parking for the Nut Basin Lake Trail, #133, by lengthening the turnout and installing trailhead signing.

  - **Trail #303.** Construct 0.4 miles of new trail to make trail connections between Trail #308 and Road 2002J. Relocate 1.25 miles of the trail onto the 2002J roads. Decommission 0.3 miles of trail leading to Little Slate Creek. Reconstruct Trail #303 from Trail #308 junction to the junction with Trail #307. Treat Trail #030 stream crossing at Little Slate Creek to reduce impacts to fish habitat (hardened ford or bridge). Align to have one crossing with Little Slate Creek.

  - **Trail #308.** Relocate 0.9 miles of trail onto portions of existing closed roads (road to trail conversion). Decommission 0.8 miles of trail along a tributary to Miller Creek. Reconstruct trail from Road 9328 to junction with Trail #303. Connect #308 to #303 downstream from #303 crossing.

  - **Trail # 309.** Treat stream crossing with Van Buren Creek to reduce impacts to fish habitat (hardened ford or bridge).

- **Re-enter Existing Rock Source**. Re-develop a Forest Service rock source, located at the 536/441 road junction, to provide material for this project and other projects across the forest **(< 1 acre).** This site would be used and remain open for recreational use following activities. Activities would be implemented over a 10 year period.

Discussion of Restoration Treatments

The objective to improve aquatic conditions and habitats to support recovery of aquatic species can be achieve by reducing sediment delivery, by reducing surface erosion or mass stability caused by past logging, road building, mining, grazing and other impacts from humans. The principal component of aquatic and watershed restoration is to reduce the effects from the existing transportation system, restoration of historic mining and grazing impacts, and active restoration of stream and riparian processes. It is also important to provide adequate passage for streamflows and aquatic species at road-stream crossings.

The combination of past harvest and disturbance from road building and mining has resulted in watershed disturbance regimes that have transitioned from infrequent pulsed events to frequent harvest entries and chronic sediment regimes, generally widespread through much of the project area.

Restoration of forest species, seral stages, patch size diversity and movement corridors can be designed consistent with natural disturbance dynamics. Disturbance dynamics are the kind, frequency, severity, and scale of ecosystem change in a landscape.

Existing road restrictions within the Upper Little Slate Creek project area do not adequately protect the wildlife and aquatic resources. Areas adjacent to a restricted road or trail are open to motorized uses. Many of the closed roads have indications of use adjacent to the roadbed. This use is disrupting wildlife and causing unacceptable sedimentation, which has a negative impact on protected fish species.

Actions planned to achieve watershed and aquatic restoration include: road improvements, maintenance and decommissioning; soil restoration, mine reclamation, access prescriptions, trail improvement or relocation, instream habitat enhancement, and soil and riparian restoration.

Proposed Watershed Restoration

The following activities are proposed to improve watershed and aquatic habitats (Map 3). As part of this project, activities would be implemented to meet Forest Plan requirements for upward trend in fish habitat and water quality. The amount of watershed restoration work required to produce an upward trend with harvest activities, has not yet been determined. The intent is to complete all watershed restoration work. Analysis will be presented in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement in the fall of 2008. These activities would maintain or improve aquatic conditions in the subwatersheds in the project area. Activities would be implemented over a 1-10 year period.

- **Road/Trail management.** Reduce sediment production from existing roads and trails, and temporary roads planned for use in this project as described previously. These activities would include improving the road/trail surfaces, improving drainage and stabilizing eroding areas. Road decommissioning and road reconditioning, as described above will also reduce sediment production.

- **Soil Restoration**. Restore soil productivity on **30 acres** through soil restoration techniques, such as decompaction, revegetation, and reestablishment of natural drainage features. Objectives of soil restoration include improvement of soil productivity and to reduce adverse effects to aquatic resources, such as decreased infiltration and increased erosion and runoff. Treatments can include road decommissioning, road-recontouring, soil-decompaction, replacing surface soil and organic material, and restoration of erosion features such as rills and gullies.

- **Riparian Restoration**. Restore approximately **2.5 miles of Little Slate Creek**. This restoration is proposed in those areas where past activities including mining, harvest, grazing, and road construction have occurred. Objectives would include re-establishment of the floodplain connectivity and function, and recovery of plant communities to improve streamside shade, and improve aquatic ecological function. This could include projects that stabilize stream banks by placement of boulders and/or root wads or large wood debris; plant riparian areas with native grasses, forbs and woody species where needed to provide bank stability and/or streamside shade; and/or relocate or decommission roads that are negatively affecting stream channels.

    - Restore subsurface flows in Little Slate meadows interrupted by #221 Road by providing additional through-road flow paths.

    - Re-establish the water table at the previous elevation/depth to regain prior riparian vegetative communities along Little Slate Creek between # 221 Road and Van Buren Creek. Restoration may include narrowing of the stream, re-meandering selected channel reaches (particularly below Turnbull Creek), stabilizing banks and planting riparian areas. This work would be accomplished using mechanical and/or hand methods.

- **Gully Stabilization**. Approximately **20-50 acres** would be treated to reduce gully and surface erosion as a result of historic grazing on sensitive soils near Nut Basin Point. Areas of severe gullies would be treated using hand methods to apply structure, soil amendments, native seed or plants, and certified weed free mulch. Objective of the stabilization is to reduce erosion, and improve soil productivity.

- **Channel Stabilization**. Stabilize **5 sites** where channel head cutting related to historic mining activity is occurring**.** These include sites on Miller Creek (3 sites), Ozark Creek (1 site), and Gold Lake Creek (1 site).Techniques could include bioengineered stabilization structures of the head cuts and channels, using machinery and/or hand methods. Sites would be planted or seeded to re-establish vegetation.

- **Mine rehabilitation.** Approximately **10 inactive placer sites** would be stabilized and revegetated. Techniques such as reshaping of disturbed areas, soil amendments, revegetation would be used to reduce erosion. The sites are in the Miller Creek drainage.

  Mining activities have affected large areas throughout the Little Slate subwatersheds. This includes soil disturbance that has increased sediment delivery to streams, raw and exposed soils that have allowed for noxious weed infestation, mine tailings, diversions, ditches and ponds that have altered the landscape and riparian areas, and mining roads that are rutted and transporting sediment to adjacent streams. Inventories were completed in 1997, 2006 and

will continue in 2007 to determine the extent of disturbance and the appropriate methods needed for restoration. Inactive mine rehabilitation would focus on the re-establishment of natural flow paths, weed invasion monitoring and removal, revegetation with native grasses, shrubs, and trees in most locations, and possibly some recontouring of existing skid roads.

- **Stream Crossing Improvement.** Treat **approximately 6 sites,** with additional sites evaluated this summer. There are two trail stream crossings that would also be treated (see previous section). Projects are proposed to reduce the risk of culvert failure during runoff events and/or improve upstream passage of aquatic organisms, particularly spawning salmonids. In some cases, culverts would be upgraded by retrofitting with baffles or by other means. In other situations, they would be replaced with larger culverts or other stream crossing devices. Log culverts would be removed completely with the crossing returned to an as near natural gradient as possible, or hardening of the crossing for a natural ford where necessary.

    - Replace 3 culverts identified not to accommodate a 100-yr flood, including associated bedload and debris, and prevent diversion of streamflow out of the channel and down the road in the event of blockage. Known sites include Boulder Creek culvert on the #221 Road and the Little Boulder Creek culvert at the #221 Road. One culvert on the #2002 road at Van Buren Creek.

    - Replace 3 culverts identified as being full or partial barriers to fish passage. Known sites include: Turnbull, Victor, Burn Creeks (all intersecting with the #2002 Road). Nineteen potential fish barrier sites will be evaluated this summer.

- **Culvert/Log bridge Removal.** Approximately **15 stream crossings** have been identified on roads that would be decommissioned. The purpose of the proposed projects is the same as stream crossing improvements but the structure (culvert or log bridge) would be removed and not replaced. Each crossing would be recontoured and revegetated, as needed.

Proposed Forest Plan Amendment - Soils

It is likely that a Forest Plan amendment is needed to implement vegetation treatment activities in some areas with past ground disturbance. Forest Plan Standard #2 (Forest Plan, p. II-22) states, "A minimum of 80 percent of an activity area shall not be detrimentally compacted, displaced, or puddled upon completion of activities. This direction does not apply to permanent recreation facilities and other permanent facilities such as system roads." Ground verification has found that past activities have caused detrimental soil disturbance in some of the areas proposed for fuel hazard reduction activities.

Amendment Language

The proposed Forest Plan amendment would replace soil standard #2 with the following language for the entire Nez Perce National Forest, including the Little Slate Creek project area:

> *Where detrimental soil conditions from past activities affect 15 percent or less of the activity area, a cumulative minimum of 85 percent of the activity area shall not be detrimentally compacted, displaced, or puddled upon completion of activities.*
>
> *Where detrimental soil conditions from past activities affect more than 15 percent of the activity area, the cumulative detrimental soil disturbance from project implementation and past activities shall not exceed the conditions prior to the planned activity and shall provide a net improvement in soil quality.*

This direction does not apply to permanent recreation facilities and other permanent facilities such as system roads. This amendment would make the Forest Plan standard consistent with Regional soil quality guidelines.

Preliminary Issues

The interdisciplinary team has begun to analyze the effects of the proposed activities and has identified the following preliminary issues. Some issues may be deemed significant to drive an alternative to the proposed action others may have specific effects analysis completed. Design and mitigation measures to some issues would also be identified. All would be documented in the future draft environmental impact statement. Public comments and analysis will be considered to identify significant issues and potential alternatives.

- Activities in Inventoried Roadless Areas or unroaded areas.
- Activities within Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas and consistency with Forest Plan amendment #20 (PACFISH).
- Potential effects of the activities on threatened, endangered and sensitive (TES) wildlife species and habitat.
- Potential effects of the activities on old growth.
- Potential effects of the activities on threatened, endangered and sensitive (TES) fish, fish habitat and water quality.
- Potential effects of the activities on soil productivity.

- Potential effects of the Forest Plan Amendment (Soils).
- Potential effects on heritage resources.
- Consistency with the Clean Water Act, and Idaho State water quality standards and beneficial uses; including the streams in the analysis area identified as impaired waters in Section 5 of the Integrated (303(d) /305(b)) Report.
- Change in administrative and/or public access or to mining claims in the area, and on roads and trails.
- Openings greater than 40 acres.

Alternatives

The NEPA implementing regulations require that an Environmental Impact Statement evaluate alternatives. Possible alternatives to be considered in the draft environmental impact statement include: No activities in Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA) and decommissioning of the end of #2002 Road, from the junction with the #2002C Road. Additional alternatives may arise from public comments, analysis or new information.

Comment Opportunity and Timeframes

I am the Responsible Official for this project and I expect to make a decision on this project by May 2008. I am seeking your comments on the potential effects of the proposed activities outlined in this letter. I will consider all public comments before making a decision. In submitting comments, please provide specific facts along with supporting reasons that you believe should be considered by me in reaching a decision.

Please include the following information with your comments: (1) your name, address, telephone number, and organization represented (if applicable); (2) the name of the project for which you are submitting comment; and (3) supporting reasons why *specific* issues should be considered by me. Copies of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement will be mailed to those people who have submitted comments during the comment period and to those who request a copy.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted until July 20, 2007 *(30 calendar days following publication of this notice in the Federal Register).* Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 7:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.; Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Oral comments must be provided to the Project Leader's office during normal business hours via telephone (208) 983-1950, or by facsimile (208) 983-4099 or in person. Electronic comments must be submitted in rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to *comments-northern-nezperce-salmon-river@fs.fed.us* . The subject line must contain the name "Little Slate Project", for which you are submitting comments. Acceptable formats are MS Word, Word Perfect, or RTF. For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of comments, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means.

The US Forest Service uses the process required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA requires a systematic, interdisciplinary approach to ensure integrated application of the natural and social sciences and the environmental design arts in any planning and decision-making that affects the human environment (42 U.S.C. 4332(2)(A)). Reviewers may wish to refer to the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3 in addressing these points. This comment period provides those interested in or affected by this project an opportunity to make their concerns known. Comments must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 215.6.

Those who provide timely and substantive comments, to this solicitation, will be eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations. Comments received in response to this scoping request, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered, however, those who submit anonymous comments may not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Part 215.

Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27(d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and, where the request is denied, the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within a specific number of days.

Further information about this project can be obtained from Jennie Fischer, Team Leader, during normal office hours (weekdays, 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) at the Nez Perce National Forest Supervisors Office (Address: 1005 Highway 13, Grangeville, Idaho; Phone, voice (208) 983-4048, TDD 208-983-2280 (hearing impaired); fax: 208-983-4099; e-mail: jfischer02@fs.fed.us).

I appreciate your input on this project.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jane L. Cottrell
JANE L. COTTRELL
Forest Supervisor

cc: John W Carlson, Jennie Fischer

Attachments:
Map 1 - Little Slate - Vicinity Map
Map 2 - Proposed Action - Vegetation Treatments
Map 3 - Proposed Action - Watershed Restoration & Trail Treatments

United States Department of Agriculture – Forest Service (USDA-FS).
1987. Nez Perce National Forest Plan. Northern Region, Nez Perce National Forest, Grangeville, Idaho.

2000. Slate Creek Ecosystem Analysis at the Watershed Scale (EAWS). Nez Perce National Forest, Grangeville, Idaho.